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Open Access Funds: Getting a Bigger Bang for Our Bucks

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Abstract

Many libraries offer open access publishing funds to support authors in paying article processing charges (APC) levied by some OA journals. However, there are few standard practices for managing or assessing these funds. The Open Access Working Group (OAWG) of the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) was asked to investigate and articulate best practices for successful open access fund management. In spring 2015, the OAWG surveyed Canadian academic libraries with OA funds to review their criteria and collect feedback on current practices. The survey proved timely because many OA funds are under review. Shrinking budgets, ending pilots, and questions around scale and sustainability of funds provide context for some institutions revisiting or reconfiguring these funds. At the same time, Canada's principal funding agencies have issued the new *Tri-Agency Open Access Policy on Publications* (effective May 2015) which mandates open access for funded research and which is increasing the demand from researchers for financial support from their institutions to pay APCs and other OA costs. This paper addresses findings of the survey, some best practices for open access publishing fund management, and counter arguments for OA funds, as well as other strategies developed by international agencies including the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC).

Introduction

Worldwide focus on open access to scholarship has grown tremendously over the past decade. Three key contributors to this increased focus on open access (OA) are: shifts in technology to facilitate robust sharing of research, cultural shifts in academe toward more open discourse, and the increasing requirement of funders and funding agencies that research outputs to be made openly available.

A significant number of universities have demonstrated their support for open scholarship by offering funds to support authors who choose to publish in open access journals. These funds are used to pay for article processing charges (APCs) in open access journals or institutional membership fees charged by open access publishers such as PLoS, BioMed Central, or Hindawi.

SPARC, the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, defines an open access fund as:

A pool of money set aside by an institution to support publication models that enable free, immediate, online distribution of, and access to, scholarly research. (SPARC, 2014a)

There are 49 institutions in the US (SPARC, 2014c), and 14 institutions in Canada (Yates, 2014) offering campus author funds. These numbers have grown along with the increase in open access funder mandates. While the Canadian government has been slower than other countries in adopting open access mandates, the principal national funding agencies (Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, NSERC; Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, SSHRC; and Canadian Institutes of Health research, CIHR) have recently implemented a joint *Tri-Agency Open Access Policy on*

Publications for all research funded after May 2015 (Government of Canada, 2015). The policy may provide impetus for Canadian institutions to increase financial and operational support for open access.

Libraries are often the initiators and managers of open access support initiatives, endeavours which align with the library's overall mission of enabling access to scholarship, and are part of providing concrete support for transformative change within an unsustainable scholarly publishing system (SPARC, 2014b).

The Study: Current Practices for Open Access Funds in Canada

A review of the criteria used by North American libraries and institutions which administer open access funds reveals wide variation in who and what is eligible for these grants (SPARC, 2014a). There is also a lack of common standards for fund management issues such as workflow, budgeting, and accountability.

To assist libraries in maximizing the return on their investment in these funds, the CARL Open Access Working Group established a subcommittee to investigate open access funds in Canada and offer suggestions for best practices for fund management. While this work focused on open access funds at Canadian libraries, the results could also be valuable for institutions in the US and other locations which manage similar funds. To gather evidence for this project, a web-based survey was circulated to the 14 Canadian institutions known to have open access publishing funds, all of whom are CARL members. All 14 institutions answered the survey, which was administered in March and April 2015.

Fund Size & Scope

Most of the 14 open access funds in Canada have been established within the last three years, although some are much older; for example, the University of Calgary has had a fund since 2008. Monetary support ranges from \$10,000 for the smallest—at Brock University in St. Catharines, ON—and exceeds \$250,000 at larger universities in Ottawa and Calgary. The mode amount is \$50,000.

Fund Criteria

Who is eligible for funding?

Best practice: Ensure that eligibility criteria for applicants are transparent and fair, and can be adjusted as needed. Several common themes emerge when examining who and what works are eligible for financial support from these funds. In most universities, faculty members, librarians, staff, graduate students, and postgraduate students were eligible to apply for the OA funds. In some cases, undergraduate students, visiting scholars, part-time and sessional faculty, and researchers affiliated with research institutes could use these funds. In most cases, funding is offered on a first-come, first-served basis. Other common criteria include the following: authors must use any grant funding before applying; first-time applicants only; one application per person per fiscal year; and applicant must be their paper's first author. Adopting broad, inclusive eligibility criteria will increase support for OA across different levels of an institution. Retaining flexibility to adjust eligibility can also be useful, as libraries may not initially realize which populations are interested in OA publishing. Meanwhile, restricting applicants to current members of the institution's community ensures appropriate use of scarce resources.

What is eligible for funding?

Best practice: Develop uniform eligibility criteria. The most common criterion is that funded works must be fully gold OA. It is unusual for author funds to cover hybrid publications. Other common criteria include the following: only OA fees covered, not reprints, colour illustrations, etc.; fee schedule is public; fee waiver for financial hardship; authors must acknowledge OA funding support in their final published paper; and funded article must be deposited in institutional repository. While most OA funds specify that journals must be "fully open access," there is room for confusion about that definition. Many funds use inclusion in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) as a criterion for eligibility, which serves as an important measure of quality control and objectivity when adjudicating applications. The Code of Conduct developed by the Open Access Scholarly Publishers' Association

(OASPA) presents another set of useful quality control standards. Key concepts from the Code of Conduct can be utilized as criteria regarding openness and legitimate business practices of eligible publishers. However, given that OASPA membership fees are quite high, the inclusion of actual membership as an eligibility criterion may exclude many smaller OA journals.

Copyright Issues

Best practice: Clarify rights of authors and users.

Most institutions surveyed, which require fund recipients to ensure their work carries minimal restrictions on reuse and state that content must be made publicly accessible immediately, had no embargo periods. Two institutions specify that authors must retain rights to their material. Several institutions surveyed require that funded materials be published with Creative Commons licensing, which permits greater reuse of content. A wide range of licenses are used. Libraries can more fully support open scholarship and authors' rights by recommending that funded authors retain full rights to their work and by specifying that funded materials be freely and immediately available to all users. Recommending the least restrictive Creative Commons licensing option—CC-BY—and excluding embargoed materials from funding are two key strategies for promoting the rights of both authors and readers.

Deposit in a Repository

Best practice: Facilitate automatic deposit in a repository.

Deposit of funded materials in an institutional repository is mandated by nine institutions. However, compliance may be a challenge. Requiring grant recipients to archive funded work in an institutional repository—if available—further enhances dissemination of their research and strengthens ties their ties to the library, which is usually the entity managing an institutional repository. While a fund's criteria may require deposit, compliance is problematic; developing automatic deposit workflows will enhance compliance and lessen need to “chase” authors.

Workflow and Fund Management

Best practice: Monitor time spent on managing OA funds; provide clear, openly accessible fund documentation. At

most Canadian universities, money for OA funds comes from library collections budgets. In some cases, funding also comes from outside the library from entities including research offices and academic faculties. Since the fund was a part of the library budget, fund administration and reporting were under the purview of the libraries. Some libraries shared responsibility for fund management with other campus units including research offices. There are no standard approaches to managing OA funds. Workflows vary widely across institutions and incorporate different units in and outside of the library. Because library staff have expertise in working with publishers and invoices, managing OA funds has seemed like a natural fit. However, tracking the time spent on this work will allow libraries to more clearly evaluate the staffing costs involved. It may also be useful for libraries—particularly those with small staff complements—to “outsource” some fund management responsibilities to university finance departments if possible.

OA funds are complex for both users and staff who manage the processes. Creating clear, easily accessible supporting documentation will make it easier for authors to successfully navigate the application process and reduce time spent by library staff adjudicating applicants. As well, libraries—most of which currently face significant financial pressures—must pursue transparency in reporting how their valuable resources are used to support researchers paying APCs.

Fund Assessment

Best practice: Track quantitative and qualitative measures over time and report statistics among institutions. Fund administrators were seeking recommendations from the project group (the study) on best practices for fund assessment. SPARC's *Open Access Funds in Action* (2014c) provides some basic measures of fund activity. Additional measures were identified by survey respondents or by the project group members (Table 1). These measures allow fund administrators to demonstrate equity of distribution among authors and departments. Distribution per publisher and per journal is also included, to inform management of choice of

memberships and to inform future publisher negotiations, particularly if an institution supports articles in hybrid journals.

Table 1. SPARC and additional recommended assessment measures.

SPARC	Additional Useful Measures
\$ value of fund	\$ amount expended
# articles approved	# applications received # applications rejected and reason for rejection
# payments reimbursed	
# unique submitting authors	# unique successful authors \$ per author
# unique departments	\$ and # per department
# unique publishers	\$ and # per publisher
# unique journals	\$ per journal

Tracking quantitative measures over time allows institutions to assess changes in demand, identify trends, and understand the effect of changes to criteria and to funding. Furthermore, the use of common assessment measures, reported to a central body, allows for comparison between institutions, benchmarking, and aggregate reporting; for example, at a national, international, or consortial level.

Qualitative measures gathered from fund recipients will also be necessary to measure the success of the OA fund against its stated purpose. Currently, such measures are generally not being gathered. For funds existing as a service to

authors, questions about the quality of the service are needed, such as: timeliness, responsiveness, clarity of criteria, ease of use, and whether the receiving money from the fund made a difference in whether or not the article was published as gold OA. For funds that exist primarily to support OA publishing in general, questions would focus on whether the work would have been published as gold or green OA without the support of the fund and what type of embargo, if any, would have occurred. Tracking qualitative measures over time allows institutions to evaluate the success of service improvement initiatives and impact of the fund.

Fund Changes and Future Implications

Significant changes in the surrounding financial environment occurred in 2015. Institutions' funding in many cases was being reduced. Furthermore, the fall value of the Canadian dollar relative to the US dollar meant an approximately 30% loss in buying power between 2013 and 2015, a particular challenge since the majority of Canadian collections purchases are based on US dollars. Despite the serious financial challenges, nine of fourteen institutions retained their OA fund for the following fiscal year (2015–2016), and four hoped to increase their fund's amount. However, a closer look at the remaining five institutions raises some interesting questions regarding the future of OA funds and potential best practices.

Five OA funds made significant changes. The impetus for change in these cases was financial. Four institutions inactivated their funds, either temporarily or permanently. One of these instead supports a membership with an OA publisher and promotes self-archiving. One institution stopped paying APC micropayments and reduced and refocused their fund on other OA publishing support, including: memberships; other models such as OA e-book publishing initiatives; and models within existing consortial purchases; for example, tokens. One considers their fund temporarily suspended. One fund was closed. We will discuss the final case, the University of Toronto, in more detail.

Who on Campus Should Fund APCs?

Of the 14 funds in total, 10 were funded entirely by the library, nine from the library's collections budget. Two other funds were supported jointly by the library and other campus sources, and two more were funded entirely by other campus sources (the University's research office, either alone or with another source). Four funds that were inactivated were funded entirely by the library. For the jointly supported fund that was reduced in amount and reconfigured, the library's contribution was withdrawn and the fund was subsequently financially supported only by other campus sources.

While the number of funds involved are small, and the majority of institutions retained their funds, these cases raise the question of whether financial support for OA funds is more secure when it is funded by the university's research office or central administration, when such bodies demonstrate willingness to support them, compared to when it is funded just by the library. The answer may center on whether the research office's choice to be involved in the first place was already an indication of strong support from that body. Because this survey did not delve into this question, no conclusion can be drawn based on this study.

Toward Measuring Value for OA Fund Money Within the Collections Budget

A second question relates to how to measure the value for money of OA funds. When funded by the library's collection budget, as is often the case, are OA funds able to demonstrate value for money in a way that can compete with other collections purchases for funding? One or more thousand dollars for one article certainly sounds like a high cost, relatively speaking. What might be a fair way to measure this value?

For other collections content, cost per use is a common measure of comparative value. For gold OA, the cost is one time and the use is not only perpetual but global. Setting aside for a moment the complicating factor of openness on tracking usage, article level use metrics, cumulatively since publication and from the primary locations where the article is stored, could theoretically be

factored against the publication's APC to develop a cost per use metric. At the moment, this information is available only on some platforms, and it would be time-consuming to compile it even where it is available. None of the institutions in the survey indicated they were using article-level metrics in this way. While this metric cannot be implemented currently and therefore was not recommended as a best practice at this time, further investigation into it will be valuable.

It is notable that, despite the serious financial context, approximately two-thirds of the institutions with OA funds chose to retain them. Also, three of the five fund-making changes opted for memberships and similar models and other forms of gold OA support. The commitment to gold OA still appears to be high among these institutions, though the choice of models may differ.

A Contrary view—Discontinuing an Open Access Fund—University of Toronto

OA authors' funds are often a popular and important step in advancing open access at Universities. However, after years of administering OA funds, it has become increasingly clear to some observers that authors' funds are often not the most effective use of limited library resources. At the University of Toronto the prime concerns were that OA funds were not scalable, detracted attention from our institutional repository, and were largely being distributed to commercial publishers. Additionally, the author's fund was difficult and cumbersome to maintain and administer, which had the potential to lead to a less than perfect client experience on the part of participating faculty.

History of the University of Toronto OA Fund

The University of Toronto Libraries (UTL) OA Fund Tri-Campus Scholarly Communication Group was designed to raise the profile of open access publishing and to demonstrate UTL support for authors who were early adopters of open access publishing venues.

In the fall and winter of 2011 the University of Toronto Libraries conducted an informal

environmental scan to learn more about the policies and procedures of established North American funds with close attention paid to the Canadian exemplars. The Tri-Campus Scholarly Communication Group also considered SPARC's guiding document for "Campus-based Open-access Publishing Funds: A Practical Guide to Design and Implementation" (Tananbaum, 2010) as well as information gathered when UTL hosted international scholarly communication events. Development of policies, procedures, and assessment methods for the fund continued through the spring and summer of 2012, with the initial pilot phase—defined as the first tranche of funding of \$55,000 from UT St. George, UT Mississauga, and UT Scarborough—ran from September 2012 to December 2013.

Toward the close of 2013, it became apparent that the remaining funds from the first round of funding would be insufficient to carry the fund through the remainder of the fiscal year. Rather than shutter the fund, which was the course of action originally suggested by the fund administrators, the Chief Librarian contributed an additional \$15,000 in funds, which were intended to maintain the fund until the end of the 2013–2014 fiscal year.

Closing the Fund

In May 2015 the Scholarly Communications Committee at University of Toronto agreed to recommend to the UTL Executive that the fund be discontinued in its current form for three main reasons. First, the money spent on the OA fund did not scale at an institution the size of UT; second, the OA fund monies were largely distributed to commercial publishers; and third, the money spent on the author fund could be better spent on other open access efforts, such as support for TSpace, our institutional repository.

The issue of scale was particularly challenging. The University of Toronto employs over 13,000 faculty (Quick Facts, n.d.). The initial tranche of \$55,000 in funding enabled us to fund around 35 articles. Funding one article per faculty member a year, at an average cost of \$2,000 per article would mean spending 26 million dollars on fees. It's very difficult to advertise a fund that can, at best, serve

less than one in 350 of the faculty. Also, because of information management issues, there were frequently cost overruns as applications were submitted after the OA fund had been depleted; UTL chose to fund applications that came in late to avoid a negative reaction from the faculty.

Second, numbers provided by the associate chief librarian for collections and materials management showed that 44% of the fund's fees were paid to commercial publishers, with Springer, Taylor and Francis, and Nature Publishing as the top three recipients. This finding was consistent with other research on open access authors' fees; a recent study for the Research Libraries of the United Kingdom (RLUK) found that four of the top five recipients of authors' fees (APCs) were commercial publishers. Elsevier, Wiley, Nature, and BioMed Central accounted for a vast majority of authors' fees and the money spent on those fees for 2013–2014 (Theo, 2014). This conclusion was strengthened by the following report from *Reed Elsevier: Goodbye to Berlin—The Fading Threat of Open Access (Upgrade to Market-Perform)* (Aspesi & Luong, 2014).

Third, it became clear that in order to assist the faculty in complying with the *Tri-Agency Open Access Policy on Publications* the library needed to focus on the institutional repository. The money spent on APCs could be spent on staffing mediated deposit into the repository, which was scalable at that level of funding and number of faculty. Given substantial faculty anxiety around the open access mandates, it was decided that using those funds on outreach and support for deposit would be a more efficient use of our limited resources.

Moving Forward at the University of Toronto

Moving forward, the University of Toronto Libraries are still committed to supporting open access in a variety of ways. First, the library will continue to provide services supporting use of our institutional repository; transferring funds from the OA authors' fund will enable the library to scale up those services. Second, the library will listen and be receptive to faculty needs around open access; listening to faculty will enable the

library to better target limited time and money toward high-return activities. Third, UTL will investigate new methods for supporting open access, whether through publisher/library collaboration, outreach to provincial and federal governments, or engagement with scholars and scholarly societies.

Conclusion

Academic libraries and institutions need to respond to open access. OA author funds remain a common tool in a suite of services for encouraging

and supporting open access. However, it is important to review and evaluate these funds and activities. The establishment of benchmarks, assessment, and a solid policy framework is needed to allow deliberation on the value and sustainability of those OA funds. Further, the development of shared and consistent good practices will make the OA funds more effective in meeting their intent. OA funds cannot and should not be the sole initiative on OA, but could be an important part of a larger strategy for addressing open scholarship and open access.

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